

CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Office of Current Intelligence
23 January 1963

CURRENT INTELLIGENCE MEMORANDUM*

SUBJECT: North Vietnamese Support to the Viet Cong
via Laos

1. Summary: Infiltration from North Vietnam through Laos and into South Vietnam almost certainly continues, although possibly at a lower rate than last spring and summer. An accurate and detailed assessment of this infiltration is severely handicapped by the lack of reliable intelligence.

2. Discussion: Two recent Viet Cong defectors (6 and 8 January) state that they entered South Vietnam through Laos last summer. One of these defectors

entered South Vietnam in July with three company-sized units (approximately 300-450 men total); the other defector entered South Vietnam in August in one of two groups with a combined strength of 500. The additional infiltration of a 400-man unit on 30 September has been reported by several sources and is accepted by US military intelligence officers in Saigon. These are the only substantive infiltration reports received since July 1962.

3. This paucity of information may reflect a decline in the use of the trails. In the past, there has been a rough correlation between the number of reports and the level of infiltration subsequently indicated by prisoners and defectors. The South Vietnamese, however, have been the only source of infiltration reporting and have had a tendency to exaggerate. US military officers in Saigon now are applying

ARMY review(s) completed.

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much more severe templates against South Vietnamese reporting and this effort to rule out exaggeration may also be a factor in the dearth of reports on infiltration. Furthermore, a certain amount of infiltration reporting is never processed beyond South Vietnamese tactical commands.

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trail watch teams are being trained on a priority basis and the first such team should be operational within thirty days assuming US policy considerations permit its activation in Laos.

4. Background: Communist sensitivity over the Laotian corridor has been demonstrated by the refusal of the Pathet Lao and North Vietnamese to permit any non-Communist observation in the area which generally extends through the eastern half of Laos from Route 8 to the Cambodian border. In 1961, the North Vietnamese built an 80-mile stretch of motorable road through east-central Laos between Routes 12 and 9. In dry weather, trucks can drive through on this road from North Vietnam to Tchepone. The interrogation of Viet Cong defectors over the past year has indicated this is now the preferred route as far as Tchepone

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5. Aside from this road, virtually all the trails are limited to foot traffic. The greatest disadvantage to the trail system is the lack of food. The North Vietnamese, however, have sought to remedy this problem by establishing depots at various places along the trails in lower Laos and in South Vietnam.

6. Some detail on these way stations and on the routes they serve has been gleaned from interrogations. The stations are generally separated by a day's march and are expected to raise or acquire locally the provisions they issue. Aside from billeting and feeding the infiltrators, the stations also provide guides and limited medical care. Most reports indicate these stations are commanded by a North Vietnamese noncommissioned officer and are serviced by fifteen or twenty other personnel, often recruited locally.

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7. The web-like complexity of interlinking and paralleling trails in Vietnam and lower Laos, the rugged terrain and dense jungle, make exact definition of infiltration routes impossible and observation extremely difficult. However, five general trail systems have been identified. Two of these cross the demilitarized zone (DMZ) from North to South Vietnam directly and there is little evidence that they are still being used to any extent. The third and fourth both parallel the DMZ into Laos, then turn south toward the South Vietnamese border. The fifth system includes the road constructed by the North Vietnamese in central Laos and merges with the other trail systems south of Tchepone. All recent prisoners and defectors who infiltrated have reported traveling over this fifth route. The length of the trip south varies depending on route and weather, but 30 to 45 days is average, for example, between Ha Tinh, North Vietnam and the area near Da Nang, South Vietnam.

8. Numerical estimates on infiltration are tenuous at best but documents taken from captured infiltrators and their interrogations provide some basis for assessing movement along the trails. Between 1 June and 1 December 1961, the monthly infiltration rate was estimated to be 500 to 1,000 men per month; from December 1961 until late April 1962, it was estimated at a reduced level, 100 to 200 each month. The rate picked up sharply in May 1962 and it was estimated that 2,000 to 2,200 infiltrators entered South Vietnam between 1 May and 30 June. The two most recent defectors provided what seems to be clear evidence that infiltration of sizeable groups was continuing through the summer (an estimated 1,000 for July and August) and, based on what evidence is available, it would appear that a rate of at least 500 per month was possible through September. Despite the lack of present reporting, it is the consensus of most US intelligence officers that infiltration is continuing, although possibly at a lower rate than in mid-1962.

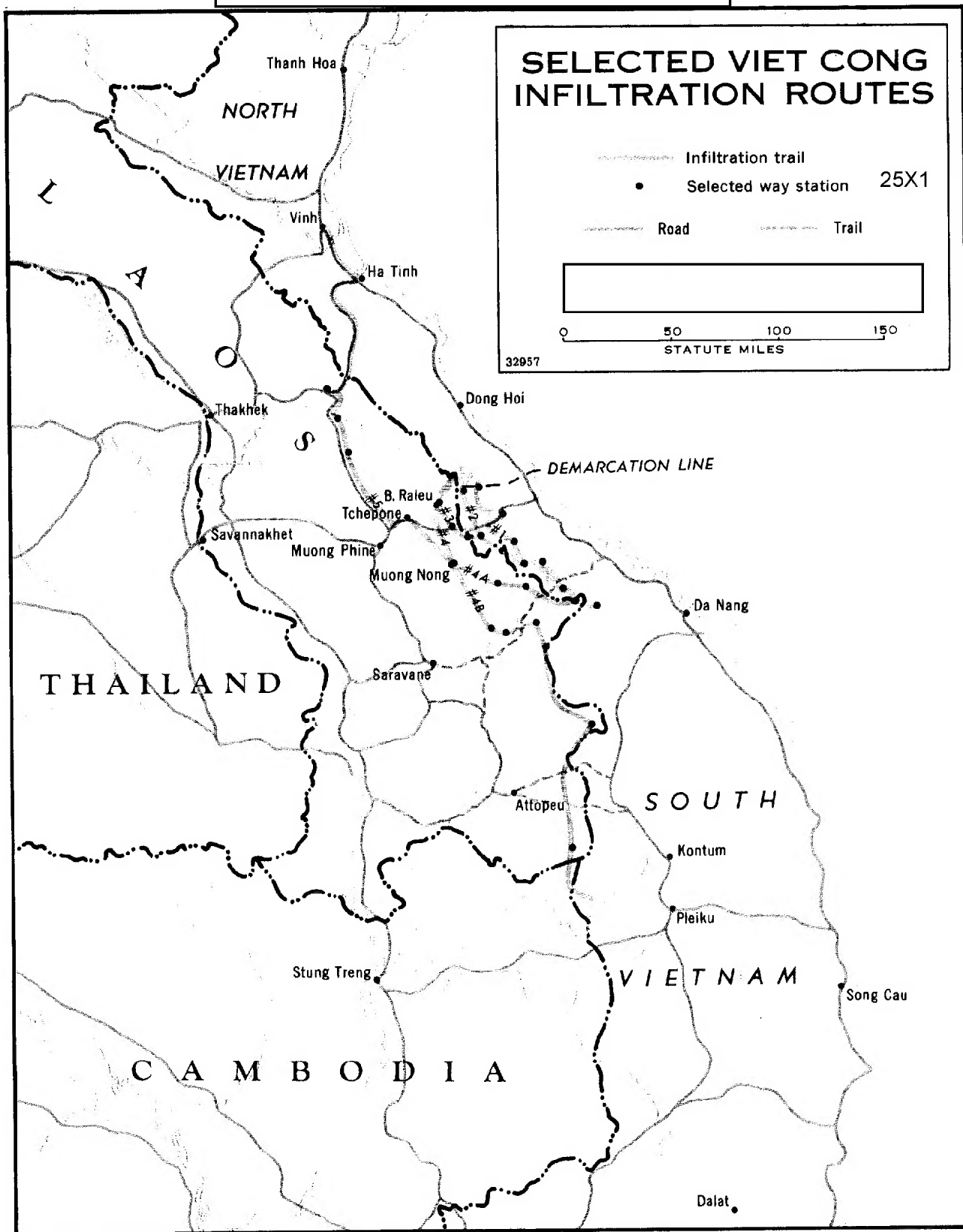
9. Many infiltrators apparently remain in northern South Vietnam to develop and fill out units in that region. Some, however, do make their way to the southern provinces and there are well-established Viet Cong routes linking both regions. Some idea of the extent of traffic moving on these internal routes was

provided by a document recently captured at a way station in the central highlands. Almost 4,000 men had passed through this station in the first half of 1962.

10. The infiltrators who have been captured or have defected in South Vietnam are usually members of North Vietnamese regular army divisions--the 305th and the 324th are most often represented. These infiltrators are not ethnic Northerners, but natives of central or southern Vietnam who joined the Viet Minh and who regrouped in the north at the end of the war with the French. In almost every case so far recorded, the infiltrator has returned to serve in the area where he was first recruited by the Communists ten to fifteen years before. North Vietnam has a stockpile of 60,000 to 70,000 regrouped Southerners most of whom have had military training and many of whom are still on active duty in the North Vietnamese army.

11. The Communists do not attempt to replace Viet Cong battle casualties through infiltration. Instead, the infiltrators are considered an investment in military growth and are intended to provide commanders, technicians, and professional cadre for Viet Cong military development. For instance, defectors or prisoners who have infiltrated have generally held the rank of sergeant or above in the North Vietnamese army and a major general apparently commands Viet Cong units in northern South Vietnam. The Viet Cong are expected to recruit the bulk of their own manpower within South Vietnam. They also are expected to produce or acquire their foodstuffs locally and to get the majority of their weapons by capturing them from South Vietnamese government troops.

12. Infiltrators do not come empty-handed, however. They carry with them some high-priority material such as communications equipment and light weapons. There were reports last summer of infiltrating groups transporting heavy 120-mm mortars and light antiaircraft weapons. These reports have not been confirmed, but there is a significant increase in the number of Chinese Communist-made weapons taken from the Viet Cong over the past few months. Among the items of Chinese equipment found in Viet Cong hands are recoilless rifles, sub-machine guns, ammunition and demolition charges.



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